

# Wittgenstein on solipsism in the 1930s: Private pains, private languages, and two uses of 'I'

Tim Button  
15 September 2017

**Abstract.** In the early-to-mid 1930s, Wittgenstein investigated solipsism via the philosophy of language. In this paper, I want to reopen Wittgenstein's 'grammatical' examination of solipsism.

Wittgenstein begins by considering the thesis that only I can feel my pains. Whilst this thesis may tempt us towards solipsism, Wittgenstein points out that this temptation rests on a grammatical confusion concerning the phrase 'my pains'. In §1, I unpack and vindicate his thinking.

After discussing 'my pains', Wittgenstein makes his now famous discussion that the word 'I' has two distinct uses: a subject-use and an object-use. The purpose of Wittgenstein's suggestion has, however, been widely misunderstood. I unpack it in §2, explaining how the subject-use connects with a phenomenological language, and so again tempts us into solipsism. In §§3–4, I consider various stages of Wittgenstein's engagement with this kind of solipsism, culminating in a rejection of solipsism (and of subject-uses of 'I') via reflections on private languages.

## 1 The privacy of pain

In the early-to-mid 1930s,<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein frequently considers the following:<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The source materials are all published posthumously. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Remarks* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1964, ed. by Rush Rhees), written around 1930. Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein: Lectures, Cambridge 1930–1933 (from the notes of G.E. Moore)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, ed. by D. G. Stern et al.); all citations are from Wittgenstein's 'Philosophy' lectures in February–March 1933, and are given as *Philosophy (Moore)*. Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge, 1932–5 (from the notes of Alice Ambrose and Margaret MacDonald)* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979, ed. by Alice Ambrose); all citations are from the same lectures as before, and are given as *Philosophy (Ambrose)*. Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958); dictated in 1933–34. Wittgenstein, 'Notes for lectures on "private experience" and "sense data"', *The Philosophical Review* 77.3 (1968), 275–320; these are lectures notes from 1934–6, and citations are given as NLPESD.

**Privacy Thesis.** I, and only I, can feel my pains.

I will first show how this Thesis can tempt us into solipsism, and then show how to avoid that temptation.

## 1.1 A conceptual problem

Traditionally, the Privacy Thesis is a springboard to an *epistemological* problem: How can I *know* that someone else is in pain? Although Wittgenstein sometimes speaks of knowledge, for him the Thesis is primarily a springboard to a *conceptual* problem: What could I *possibly mean* in speaking of ‘someone else’s pain’?

Roughly put, the problem is this. Given the Privacy Thesis, I feel my own pains. As such, I will claim to understand fully what I mean by saying ‘I am in pain’. But, precisely because my pains are *mine*, there is no way for me to ascribe them to someone *else*. And this curtails what I could possibly mean by saying ‘he is in pain’.

To get this problem rolling, consider the following passage from Wittgenstein:

As an explanation of the proposition ‘he has toothache’, one says roughly: ‘very simple: I know what it means that *I* have toothache, and if I say that he has toothache, I mean that he has now what I had then’. But what does ‘he’ mean, and what does ‘*to have* toothache’ mean? Is this a relation which the toothache had to me then and now has to him[?] Then I too would now be conscious of the toothache, and of his now having it, as I can now see a wallet in his hand which I earlier saw in mine.<sup>3</sup>

To defend the attempted ‘simple’ explanation against this line of thought, one might reply as follows:

‘Of course pain is not like a wallet, which I might pass from me to him. What I mean is that his pain is now of the same *type* as my earlier pain. If you must talk in terms of wallets, then think of my pain and his pain as two similar wallets, which cannot leave our pockets.’

But, when the Privacy Thesis is read a certain way, it blocks any reply along these lines, for the Thesis precludes anyone *else* from having *my* pain (type).<sup>4</sup> What we need is a way to ‘map’ *my* pain (type) over to *you*. But, it is just unclear how we could even *try* to effect this mapping. As Wittgenstein splendidly put problem:

---

Wittgenstein, *The Big Typescript* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, ed. by C. G. Luckhardt and M. A. E. Aue); this manuscript was composed in 1933–37.

<sup>2</sup> Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Remarks*, §§61–5; *Philosophy* (Moore), 7:109–114, 8:6–16; *Philosophy* (Ambrose), §16; *The Blue Book*, 48ff.; NLPESD, 283. See also Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), §253.

<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Remarks*, §62; *The Big Typescript*, 503, and also 510–11.

<sup>4</sup> Anticipating §1.4, below: here the grammar of ‘my pain’ is doing too much heavy-lifting.

—It is as if I were told: “Here is a chair. Can you see it clearly?—Good—now translate it into French!”<sup>5</sup>

At this point, then, I will want to ask: What *can* I mean by saying ‘he is in pain’, or ‘he hurts’? There are a few options, but none of them seems very good. For example, I could suggest that ‘he hurts’ means that he is behaving (physically) as I do when I am in pain. Now, no doubt this suggestion is far too crude to handle all the varied uses of ‘he hurts’; I would need to draw a more sophisticated link between ‘he hurts’ and (dispositions to) behaviour. But, given the Privacy Thesis, the problem is that *anything* I could hope to mean by ‘he hurts’ could be rooted only in what is physically observable.<sup>6</sup> And that is a far cry, it seems, from what I mean when I say ‘*I* hurt’.

## 1.2 Zeugmas and solipsism

So now suppose I consider the predicate ‘*x* hurts’, as it occurs in the two expressions ‘*I* hurt’ and ‘he hurts’. Given what has come before, I will want to insist that ‘it is no longer [the] same function *just* with different arguments.’<sup>7</sup> Rather, I will insist that it has a very different meaning in these two occurrences. So, I will advocate the following:

**Dual-Meaning Thesis.** The predicate ‘*x* hurts’ really ‘has two meanings, one for me and one for the other person’.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, I will regard ‘you and I hurt’ as a bad zeugma, on a par with ‘I threw up and down’.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, I will want to mark a distinction between the predicate which I use for *me*, and the predicate I apply to everyone *else*. Given the Privacy Thesis, I cannot doubt that my pains are *real*, so I will reserve ‘*x* really-hurts’ for *me*. By contrast, I have been led to the view that it is unintelligible to think that anyone else experiences (my) *real* pain. So, when it comes to other people, instead of saying ‘*x* hurts’, I will say ‘*x* kinda-hurts’. (As suggested above, the sense I attach

---

<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein, *Zettel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981, ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. v. Wright), §547.

<sup>6</sup> For discussion on these themes, see Wittgenstein *Philosophy* (Moore), 7:109, 7:111–12; *Philosophy* (Ambrose), §16; *The Blue Book*, 57; NLPESD, 286, 296.

<sup>7</sup> Wittgenstein *Philosophy* (Moore), 8:23; see also *Philosophy* (Moore), 8:11, 8:26, 8:30; *Philosophy* (Ambrose), §18.

<sup>8</sup> Wittgenstein, NLPESD, 319; see also *Philosophy* (Moore) 7:109–10, 8:12; *The Blue Book*, 72–3. Cf. also Donald Davidson’s suggestion on how to formulate scepticism about other minds in ‘First-person authority’, *Dialectica* 38.2/3 (1974), 101–11.

<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Brian King for this excellent example.

to ‘x kinda-hurts’ might be in the ballpark of ‘x’s body behaves like mine, when I really-hurt’.) Then, using this new vocabulary, I will say the following:

**Solipsistic Thesis.** Only I can *really*-hurt, and it makes no sense even to suppose that someone else might *really*-hurt.

But I have called this Thesis ‘Solipsistic’, since it is exactly how Wittgenstein characterises solipsism in *The Blue Book*:

[the solipsist] wishes to restrict the epithet “real” to what we should call his experiences; and perhaps he doesn’t want to call our experiences “experiences” at all. For he would say that it is *inconceivable* that experiences other than his own were real.<sup>10</sup>

[...] the solipsist asks: How *can* we believe that the other has pain; what does it mean to believe this? How can the expression of such a supposition make sense?<sup>11</sup>

Note that, as befits a ‘grammatical’ investigation of solipsism, this characterisation of solipsism is *meaning-theoretic*. But the short point is this: I will have been led from the Privacy Thesis, via the Dual-Meaning Thesis, to some version of solipsism.

### 1.3 From solipsism to selfless solipsism

In fact, we can characterise this version of solipsism a bit more precisely. Consider the following reasonable thesis, due to Evans:

**Compositional Constraint.** If we hold that the subject’s understanding of ‘*Fa*’ and his understanding of ‘*Gb*’ are structured, we are committed to the view that the subject will also be able to understand the sentences ‘*Fb*’ and ‘*Ga*’.<sup>12</sup>

Now consider what happens when the Solipsistic Thesis meets the Compositional Constraint. For reductio, suppose that I understand both ‘I really-hurt’ and ‘Ali kinda-hurts’ as having a subject/predicate structure. Then, by the Compositional Constraint, I will also be able to understand the sentence ‘Ali really-hurts’. But the Solipsistic Thesis states that this makes no sense. So, I must understand at least one of ‘I really-hurt’ or ‘Ali kinda-hurts’ as *not* having a subject/predicate structure. However, my understanding of ‘Ali kinda-hurts’ surely *does* have that structure: there is nothing objectionable about replacing ‘Ali’ with ‘he’, or ‘you’,

---

<sup>10</sup> Wittgenstein *The Blue Book*, 59. See also *Philosophy (Moore)*, 8:6, 8:8–9; *The Blue Book*, 46, 57, 61.

<sup>11</sup> Wittgenstein *The Blue Book*, 48. See also *The Blue Book*, 56; NLPESD, 276–7.

<sup>12</sup> Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, ed. John McDowell), 101. The entire quote is from Evans, but the name is mine (Evans introduces this Constraint *en route* to his famous Generality Constraint).

or any other term which picks out a human being.<sup>13</sup> So, I must conclude that ‘I really-hurt’ does not have a subject/predicate structure after all. And, since it is hard to see how it could have any *other* structure, I must accept that my understanding of ‘I really-hurt’ is *unstructured*.

This, however, has a surprising upshot. When I say ‘I really-hurt’ – which, given the Dual-Meaning Thesis, was just a way for me to say ‘I hurt’ more clearly – I do not attribute anything *to* anyone. The surface syntax is altogether misleading. It will therefore be clearer if, instead of saying ‘I (really-)hurt’, I were to say ‘it hurts’ – as one says ‘it snows’ – or, better yet, I were simply to say ‘HURT’.

In short, I will both have become a solipsist, and given up speaking of ‘me’. And this is precisely why Wittgenstein tells us that:

What the solipsist wants is not a notation in which the ego has a monopoly, but one in which the ego vanishes.<sup>14</sup>

Admittedly, in charting the route from solipsism to selfless solipsism, Wittgenstein does not formulate anything quite as crisp as the Compositional Constraint. However, something like that Thesis is implicit in his remark that ‘if another *cannot* have my toothache, then also *I* – in this sense – cannot have it.’<sup>15</sup>

The upshot, though, is that we have been led to what Canfield calls ‘the thesis of selfless solipsism’, which ‘lies at the heart of the *Tractatus*’.<sup>16</sup> It is worth pausing to consider just how *Tractarian* this selfless solipsism is. When I say ‘he (kinda-)hurts’, I say something about a particular object in the world. However, I say nothing about any particular object when I say ‘I (really-)hurt’. As such, I draw no boundary between *myself* and the *world*. Indeed, if ‘my’ hurt – or, perhaps better, if HURT – belongs to anything, then it belongs to the entire *world*. Aphoristically: when ‘I’ am happy, the *world* waxes; when ‘I’ am sad, the *world* wanes; so that ‘I’ do not feature *in* the world at all, but appear as its *limit*.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Including *my own* name. See Wittgenstein: *The Blue Book*, 61, 64–5, 68; NLPESD, 298; *The Big Typescript*, 512.

<sup>14</sup> Wittgenstein *Philosophy* (Ambrose), §19. See also *Philosophical Remarks*, §61; *Philosophy* (Moore), 7:114, 8:29; *Philosophy* (Ambrose), §20; *The Blue Book*, 59–60, 66; NLPESD, 308; *The Big Typescript*, §512; *Philosophical Investigations*, §§402–3.

<sup>15</sup> Wittgenstein, *The Big Typescript*, 508. See also *Philosophy* (Moore), 8:14; *The Blue Book*, 55; NLPESD, 283; *The Big Typescript*, 504, 510; *Philosophical Investigations*, §398.

<sup>16</sup> John Canfield, ‘*Tractatus* objects’, *Philosophia* 6.1 (1976) 81–99, esp. 82. Canfield is of course writing about Wittgenstein, *Tractatus-Logico Philosophicus* (1921); henceforth cited as *Tractatus*.

<sup>17</sup> See Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, §§5.632, 5.641, 6.43.

## 1.4 The grammar of ‘my pain’

So far, I have outlined a line of thought which begins with the Privacy Thesis, runs through the Dual-Meaning Thesis into the Solipsistic Thesis, and ends up with selfless solipsism. I now want to explain where this line of thought goes wrong. Wittgenstein gives us exactly the right answer: the mistake involves ‘waver[ing] between logical and physical impossibility’.<sup>18</sup> But this needs some unpacking.

Consider, again, the Privacy Thesis. On one good reading, it is just false to say ‘I, and only I, can feel my pains’. Indeed, you have probably experienced at least some of my pains: like me, you may have suffered through dislocated shoulders and disappointments.

This reading, however, treats the phrase ‘my pains’ quite generically. One could reasonably read the Thesis more specifically. So: whilst you may also have suffered the pain of dislocated shoulders, your pain was not the *specific* pain that I felt.

That is no doubt true. But it also seems *contingent*, whereas the Privacy Thesis makes a claim about what is *necessary*. And that necessary claim remains in trouble. To see why, here is a thought-experiment, essentially due to Wittgenstein, which I will use frequently in what follows:<sup>19</sup>

**Sci-Fi Example.** Gazillions of electrodes are attached to my body. These electrodes monitor the neural stimulations I am receiving, and send a copy to a super-computer. You are also attached to the super-computer with gazillions more electrodes. These subject you to exactly the same (type of) neural stimulations as I am receiving.

In the Sci-Fi Example, there is a sense in which you feel all of my specific pains. And, since the Sci-Fi Example is possible – given a permissive enough notion of possibility – there is a sense in which you *can* feel all of my (specific) pains. In that sense, the Privacy Thesis is false.

To defend the Privacy Thesis, I might draw a type/token distinction. I might insist that, even in the Sci-Fi Example, I have *my* pain-token, and you have *yours*, and although these are of the same *type*, they are distinct pain-*tokens*.<sup>20</sup> But to say this, I must introduce a new count-noun, ‘pain-token’; and introducing this noun does not seem compulsory.<sup>21</sup> The mere fact that our *bodies* remain distinct, in the

---

<sup>18</sup> Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book*, 56.

<sup>19</sup> Wittgenstein: *Philosophy* (Ambrose), §16; *The Blue Book*, 54.

<sup>20</sup> Thanks to Lucy O’Brien for suggesting something like this.

<sup>21</sup> I take it that this is the thrust of Wittgenstein’s remark: ‘What should this mean: he has *these* pains? apart from, that he has *such* pains: i.e. of such intensity, kind, etc. But only in that sense can I too have ‘these pains’.’ *The Big Typescript*, 508.

Sci-Fi example, only requires that we speak of distinct *people* in pain, not of ‘distinct pain-tokens’.

Still, even *if* we agree to say that you and I have ‘distinct pain-tokens’ in the Sci-Fi Example, the Privacy Thesis remains shaky. To show this, we can simply follow Wittgenstein in pushing the Sci-Fi Example further still. So, suppose that you and I are not *merely* wired together using a super-computer, but that we have ‘a part of our bodies in common, say a hand’; that ‘the nerves and tendons of my arm and [yours are] connected to this hand by an operation. Now imagine the hand stung by a wasp. Both of us cry, contort our faces, give the same description of the pain, etc.’<sup>22</sup>

As Wittgenstein notes, I could *refuse* to count even this as a case where you feel my pain(-token). However, by now, there is nothing I could say to *justify* my refusal, beyond doggedly insisting: ‘If you feel it, it isn’t mine’.<sup>23</sup> But that insistence would amount only to a *grammatical proposal* about how to use the phrase ‘my pain’ (or ‘the same pain’).<sup>24</sup> Otherwise put: in an effort to defend the Privacy Thesis, I have turned it into a proposed rule of *grammar*.

At this point, though, the Privacy Thesis has become completely harmless. After all, any grammatical proposal is optional. So, I could speak this way if I wanted to. But I must not make the mistake of thinking that my choice to speak a certain way has taught me anything new about the world,<sup>25</sup> or anything about what my words could possibly mean.

## 2 Two uses of ‘I’

The discussion of §1 helps us to understand some of Wittgenstein’s remarks concerning privacy and solipsism in the early-to-mid 1930s. It also, I hope, defuses one particular impulse towards solipsism. However, a few reminders about the grammar of ‘my pain’ will not defuse all *possible* impulses towards solipsism.

With this in mind, I now want to turn to a more famous target: Wittgenstein’s claim that the word ‘I’ has two uses. For that is the main target of this paper.

---

<sup>22</sup> Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book*, 54. See also *Philosophy* (Moore), 7:113, 8:11.

<sup>23</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophy* (Moore), 8:11. See also *The Blue Book*, 54.

<sup>24</sup> On grammatical statements, see Wittgenstein: *Philosophy* (Moore), 7:112–114, 8:6, 8:9–11; *The Blue Book*, 54; NLPESD, 283. The idea of *proposing* a rule comes through in Wittgenstein: *Philosophy* (Moore), 8:12–14; *Philosophy* (Ambrose), §16; NLPESD, 317–18.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Wittgenstein: *The Blue Book*, 55, 70; NLPESD, 277.

## 2.1 The two uses, in context

Wittgenstein moves immediately from a discussion of solipsism – along the lines sketched in §1 – into the passage where he distinguishes two uses of ‘I’:

Now the idea that the real I lives in my body is connected with the peculiar grammar of the word ‘I’, and the misunderstandings this grammar is liable to give rise to. There are two difference cases in the use of the word “I” (or “my”) which I might call “the use as object” and “the use as subject”. Examples of the first kind of use are these: “My arm is broken”, “I have grown six inches”, “I have a bump on my forehead”, “The wind blows my hair about”. Examples of the second kind are “I see so-and-so”, “I hear so-and-so”, “I try to lift my arm”, “I think it will rain”, “I have toothache”. One can point to the difference between these two categories by saying: The cases of the first category involve the recognition of a particular person, and there is in these cases the possibility of an error, or as I should rather put it: The possibility of an error has been provided for.<sup>26</sup>

A vast literature cites this passage as alerting us to an important phenomenon.<sup>27</sup> However, that literature rarely considers *why* Wittgenstein was interested in the phenomenon. Indeed, when this passage is cited, the first sentence is usually omitted. But that sentence shows clearly that Wittgenstein wants to connect the temptation towards solipsism – which I discussed in §1 – with misunderstanding the grammar of the two uses of ‘I’. As such, the vast literature citing this passage has taken us to interesting places, but very different ones than Wittgenstein intended.

In the rest of this paper, my aim is to do what that literature does not: to revisit Wittgenstein’s work, with the aim of showing both why the subject-use of ‘I’ threatens to lead us to solipsism, and how solipsism is to be avoided.

## 2.2 Subjectivity and objectivity

I will start by unpacking the passage a little. Wittgenstein states that the distinctive feature of the *object*-use of ‘I’ is that it ‘involve[s] the recognition of a particular person’, and that in such cases one can make a mistake about who the person is. To unpack this remark, I will flesh out each of Wittgenstein’s four exemplar object-uses of ‘I’:

---

<sup>26</sup> Wittgenstein: *The Blue Book*, 66–7. See also *Philosophy* (Moore), 7:110, 8:8, 8:22–3, 8:27–8, 8:31–2, 8:35–6; *The Big Typescript*, 511.

<sup>27</sup> This literature gets going with Sydney Shoemaker, ‘Self-reference and self-awareness’, *The Journal of Philosophy* 65.19 (1968), 555–67, and Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, 179–91, 205–57.



**Broken Arm Example.** I am in a rugby scrum, which collapses. I ‘feel a pain in my arm, see a broken arm at my side, and think it is mine’.<sup>28</sup> So I exclaim “My arm is broken”. But the arm I take to be my own is not mine, but someone else’s.

**Growth Example.** My parents have been measuring me and my siblings, regularly making marks on the kitchen wall corresponding to our height (and writing the date alongside). Comparing two of these marks, I say “I have grown six inches”. But I am actually looking at marks my parents made for my sister, rather than for me.

**Mirror Example.** Looking at what I take to be my reflection, I see a bump on what I take to be my forehead. I say “I have a bump on my forehead”. But I am not looking at my reflection. Instead, I am looking at an actor who is disguised like me and shadowing my every move; but he and only he has a bump on his forehead.

The final case is ‘the wind blows my hair about’. To deal with this, I could re-use the Mirror Example. But, both because it will both prove helpful later, and also because it provides a connection with the material from earlier sections, I will deal with by using a variant of the Sci-Fi Example from §1.4:

**Sci-Fi Example (variant).** Unbeknownst to me, Chip and I are wired into the set up of the Sci-Fi example, with me as the recipient of all the neural stimulations that Chip’s body receives. Now, on the basis of (what I take to be) tell-tale sensations in my scalp, I exclaim “the wind blows my hair about”. But, Chip’s hair, not mine, is being blown about.

To capture what is at work in these examples, and in Wittgenstein’s general distinction, I will now offer a schematic definition.<sup>29</sup>

**Definition.** The statement ‘I am  $\phi$ ’ is OBJECTIVAL iff there is a possible scenario where (a) I have grounds to believe that I am  $\phi$ , but (b) given more information about the scenario, my original grounds would *instead* give me with grounds to believe that someone *else* is  $\phi$ . Otherwise, the statement ‘I am  $\phi$ ’ is SUBJECTIVAL. (Similar definitions can be offered for statements involving ‘me’, ‘my’, etc.)

---

<sup>28</sup> Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book*, 67.

<sup>29</sup> I intend for this to be a universal generalisation of a definition due to Crispin Wright, in ‘Self-knowledge: The Wittgensteinian legacy’, 19. (Printed in *Knowing our Own Minds*, ed. by Wright et al (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).) Let  $g$  be some grounds for making a judgement; then Wright says that a statement is IEM-given- $g$  iff  $g$  is ‘such that in the event that the statement in question is somehow defeated, it cannot survive as a ground for the corresponding existential generalization.’ That is: a statement is subjectival iff it is IEM-given- $g$  for all  $g$  that might justify the statement. Wittgenstein’s subject-use of ‘I’ certainly corresponds to the *universal* formulation. This is clear from the fact that ‘the wind blows my hair about’ is IEM-given- $g$ , when  $g$  is just *ordinary sensations of my own scalp*. But there is a much deeper point here. In §2.3, I show that Wittgenstein links his subject-use of ‘I’ to statements concerning pure phenomenology, or sense data. As I show, that link is necessary, for statements which are IEM-given- $g$  for all  $g$  (i.e. subjectival statements). But there is no such general link for statements which are IEM-given- $g$  for *some*  $g$ .

I hope it is immediately clear that Wittgenstein's four examples of subject-uses of 'I' are *subjectival*, and that his four examples of object-uses of 'I' are *objectival*. But, to make it completely explicit, consider the Sci-Fi (variant) Example. Here, (a) my tell-tale sensations give me grounds to believe that the wind blows my hair about; but (b) if I were to discover that I was wired up to Chip, then those tell-tale sensations would cease to give me any grounds for thinking that the wind blows *my* hair about, and would instead give me grounds to believe that the wind blows *Chip's* hair about.

## 2.3 Subjectival statements as descriptions of phenomenology

In fact, having worked through the Sci-Fi (variant) example in detail once, it should be clear that Sci-Fi setups can be used to highlight the objectivity of *any* of Wittgenstein's exemplar *object*-uses of 'I'. Recognising this will allow me to show why Wittgenstein claimed that subjectival statements are attempts to describe *phenomenology*.

Any statement 'I am  $\phi$ ' which says something physical about me is *objectival*. To see this, consider again the Sci-Fi Example (variant) from §1.4. There, I judge that the wind blows my hair about, when in fact Chip's hair is being blown about and I am receiving sensations from his scalp; so my claim is objectival. We can raise similar issues for any physical attribution that I could justifiably form on a sensory basis.<sup>30</sup> For example: the statement 'I am seated' is objectival, since I may say this because I am receiving Chip's proprioceptive signals. Similarly, the statement 'a tree is in front of me' is objectival, since I may make this claim because I am receiving the signals from Chip's retinas. Generalising, enough Sci-Fi thinking will show that any statement which says something physical about me – any claim about my posture, my body, or my immediate environment – is objectival.

Consequently, if we are looking for *subjectival* statements, then we must turn our attention from physical attributions to *mental* attributions.<sup>31</sup> But this has a knock-on effect. Many attributions are mixed, and we must bracket the physical components of such attributions.<sup>32</sup> To illustrate: suppose I say 'I am hungry', but

---

<sup>30</sup> A similar point is made by François Recanati in *Perspectival Thought: A plea for (moderate) relativism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 149–50. This disagrees with Shoemaker, 'Self-reference and self-awareness', 556–7.

<sup>31</sup> NB: I do not ultimately want to endorse the idea that there is such a sharp distinction. My aim here is just to investigate what kind of content subjectival claims could possibly have (with the ultimate aim, in §4, of showing that must have (almost) none).

<sup>32</sup> Carnap, *Der logische Aufbau der Welt* (1928), §64, introduces the word 'bracket' in outlining his methodological solipsism: 'the experiences must simply be taken as they occur. We shall not claim reality or nonreality in connection with these experiences; rather, these claims will be 'bracketed' (i.e.,

then discover that the situation is Sci-Fi, and that I am receiving the hunger pangs from Chip's body rather than my own. In this situation, I may reasonably want to say 'it is Chip (not me) who is hungry'.<sup>33</sup> This suggests a good sense in which the statement 'I am hungry' is *objectival*. Conversely, if my statement is supposed to be *subjectival*, then we must take the claim to involve only 'narrow' content; roughly, to concern only what is going on 'in my head'. Then we can say: even if I am hungry in the narrow sense, only because Chip is hungry in the flesh-and-blood sense and I am being sent signals from Chip's body, still, this in no way threatens that *I* am hungry in the required (narrow) sense. That is: everything physical must be bracketed from any subjectival claims.

Similarly, any notion of *duration* must be bracketed away from subjectival claims. Consider 'I *was* hungry'. Even after we have bracketed the question of exactly whose stomach rumbled, this past-tensed statement remains *objectival*. After all, I may say 'I *was* hungry' because I seem to remember being hungry, when in fact these are not *my* own memories of hunger but rather *Chip's* memories, which have been implanted in me by some (further) Sci-Fi mechanism. On discovering this, I may reasonably way to say 'it was Chip (not me) who was hungry'.<sup>34</sup>

Subjectival claims must, therefore, be restricted to present-tensed, mental judgements.<sup>35</sup> And only a little more generalising should convince you that subjectival statements concern nothing but *sense data*, or pure *phenomenology*, or some-such.<sup>36</sup>

Wittgenstein was aware of all of this. In a lecture on 6 March 1933, Wittgenstein introduced the idea that 'I' has two uses. But he then immediately insisted that 'I might have tooth-ache, even if there were no body – if my body was destroyed', when the 'I' is used as subject.<sup>37</sup> He repeated the same point about toothache later in that lecture,<sup>38</sup> and also offered another example: "This sound

we will exercise the phenomenological 'withholding of judgment', *ἐποχή*, in Husserl's sense).' Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Meaning and mind* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 481–6, provides interesting commentary on Wittgenstein's relationship with methodological solipsism.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, 219–20.

<sup>34</sup> Such quasi-memories have been frequently discussed in this literature, post-Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, 235–48.

<sup>35</sup> Note: present-tensed and not present-*continuous*. Suppose I judge that I am composing a poem. This involves some *ongoing* activity: it suggests that I *was* composing it, and *will continue* to compose it. However, via something elaborately Sci-Fi, I can make sense of discovering that *my apparent* memories of composing the poem are really Chip's memories, and of discovering that Chip (not me) will continue to compose the poem. So, if we want an apparently present-continuous claim to be subjectival, we must bracket such claims down to *instantaneous* versions of those judgement.

<sup>36</sup> Note: they can involve the *phenomenology* of intention, as in Wittgenstein's example "I try to lift my arm". However, the subjectival use should not connote any 'authorship'. To see why, consider a Sci-Fi set-up where *Chip's* intentions are being transmitted into my head.

<sup>37</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophy* (Moore), 8.32.

<sup>38</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophy* (Moore), 8.35; see also *Philosophy* (Ambrose), §19; *The Big Typescript*, 514.

moves round my head clockwise” has meaning independently of the physical head.’<sup>39</sup> In fact, the connection to phenomenology is completely explicitly in *The Blue Book*. Three pages after introducing his two uses of ‘I’, he wraps up his discussion of the subject-use, and says:

In fact one may say that what in these investigations we were concerned with was the grammar of those words describing what are called “mental activities”: seeing, hearing, feeling, etc. And this comes to the same thing as saying that we are concerned with the grammar of ‘phrases describing sense data’.<sup>40</sup>

So, when Wittgenstein offers “*I see so-and-so*” and “*I hear so-and-so*” as exemplar subjectival statements, he (implicitly) takes it that everything physical is bracketed from such statements; that they concern only first-personal phenomenology.

## 2.4 From phenomenology to solipsism

Once we have recognised that subjectival claims amount to descriptions of phenomenology, however, there is a very quick route to solipsism.

We have seen that if I say (subjectively) ‘I hurt’, then my claim amounts to a description of my phenomenology. By contrast, a claim like ‘he hurts’ does not concern my phenomenology.<sup>41</sup> As such, I must insist that the *sense* of the predicate ‘x hurts’ is totally different, when we consider ‘I hurt’ (understood subjectively) rather than ‘he hurts’. That is, I will embrace the Dual-Meaning Thesis of §1.2. To mark the difference, I will want to use ‘x really-hurts’ for subjectival statements, and ‘x kinda-hurts’ for other people.<sup>42</sup> And so, exactly as in §1.2, I will arrive at the (meaning-theoretic) Solipsistic Thesis.

In short, thinking about subjectivity has given fresh life to the Dual-Meaning Thesis, and thereby renewed the threat of solipsism. Moreover, the renewed threat is much harder to deal with than the original threat. Indeed, Wittgenstein’s own response to this threat seems to emerge only gradually, over months or maybe years. Roughly, his thought progression is characterised by the following stages:

- (1) The word ‘I’, as it occurs in subjectival statements, does not refer to anything.

---

<sup>39</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophy* (Moore), 8:35.

<sup>40</sup> Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book*, 70.

<sup>41</sup> Or rather, if it does, it does so only indirectly, as in e.g. Carnap’s *Aufbau*.

<sup>42</sup> And also for any objectival statements of pain.

This claim rebuts any version of solipsism which insists that some particular self is privileged. And this line of thought is clear from Wittgenstein's 1933 lectures onwards. However,

(2) Claim (1) is compatible with selfless solipsism.

Moreover, there are certain hints of selfless solipsism in the 1933 lectures. That said,

(3) We can avoid solipsism, of any form, by regarding subjectival utterances as more like moans than judgements.

This line of thought is floated in *The Blue Book*. But Wittgenstein's decisive answer to solipsism comes when he realises that:

(4) Considerations about private languages show that (almost) no truth-apt content can be attached to any subjectival utterance.

There are a few hints of this in *The Blue Book*, but the idea becomes much clearer in subsequent lecture notes.

In the rest of this paper, I will run through these four chronological stages of Wittgenstein's engagement with solipsism, considering stages (1)–(3) in the next section, and paving the way for the *real* answer to solipsism in §4

## 3 Referring and moaning

### 3.1 'I' as not referring

The main line of thought, in both Wittgenstein's 1933-lectures and *The Blue Book*, is this: the word 'I', as it occurs in a subjectival statement, does not refer to a particular *self*. Here, I will outline why Wittgenstein says this; in the next subsection, I will explain why this does not really answer the solipsist.

As explained in §2.3, subjectival statements are just attempts to describe phenomenology. As a matter of phenomenology, though, when I see a red patch, I do not observe *myself* seeing a red patch; I simply *visually experience redness*. Likewise, to use an example from Wittgenstein, 'The experience of feeling a toothache isn't the experience that a person, I, has something.'<sup>43</sup> More generally,

---

<sup>43</sup> Wittgenstein, Big Typescript, 506.

according to Wittgenstein, the ‘truth is: No person necessarily enters into a sensory experience at all.’<sup>44</sup> His point here is simply a rewording of Hume’s observation that ‘when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other[...]. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception’.<sup>45</sup>

The upshot is this. Since subjectival statements are descriptions of phenomenology, and *I* am not an element of the phenomenology, the word ‘I’ in a subjectival statement does not refer to *me*. So, when I (subjectively) claim ‘I hurt’, I do not attribute anything *to* anyone. As in §1.3, then, it would be less misleading for me to say ‘*it* hurts’, or simply ‘HURT’. In short: *I* disappear from subjectival statements.<sup>46</sup>

### 3.2 Selfless solipsism remains standing

Unfortunately, though, we cannot refute solipsism *just* by showing that the word ‘I’ does not refer when used in a subjectival statement.

In his *Blue Book* discussion of subjectivity, Wittgenstein clearly sets out the following line of thought. Before we investigate the ‘grammar’ of subjectival statements, we might think that the word ‘I’ must always refer to something. But, when we make a subjectival claim ‘I am  $\phi$ ’, it seems that we do not use the word ‘I’ to refer to some person that we have recognized by their ‘bodily characteristics; and this creates the illusion that we use this word to refer to something bodiless, which, however, has its seat in our body.’<sup>47</sup> To defeat *this* illusion, then, it is sufficient to show that, in these cases, the word ‘I’ does *not* refer to anything after all. That is: by better understanding ‘the peculiar grammar of the word “I”’, we will rid ourselves of ‘the idea that the real I lives in my body’.<sup>48</sup>

Overcoming (this caricature of) Cartesian metaphysics is certainly some achievement.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the line of thought that tells against (caricatured)

---

<sup>44</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophy (Moore)*, 8:6; see also *Philosophy (Moore)*, 8:2, 8:4, 8:8; *Philosophy (Ambrose)*, §19; NLPESD, 282; *The Big Typescript*, 506.

<sup>45</sup> Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), Bk.I, Pt.IV, §VI. See also Carnap, *Aufbau*, §65: ‘*the given is subject-less*’. See also Schlick, ‘Meaning and verification’, *The Philosophical Review* 45.4 (1936), 339–69, esp. 367.

<sup>46</sup> See Wittgenstein: *Philosophy (Moore)*, 8:22–3, 8:39; *Philosophy (Ambrose)*, §18; *The Blue Book*, 67; NLPESD, 307.

<sup>47</sup> Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book*, 70.

<sup>48</sup> Both quotes in this sentence from Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book*, 67.

<sup>49</sup> Ambrose remarks that Wittgenstein examined ‘the Cartesian question, as though it does not concern a fact of the world but rather a matter of expression’. Ambrose, ‘*The Yellow Book* notes in relation to *The Blue Book*’, *Crítica* 9.26 (1977) 3–23, esp. 9. This is clearly also a theme of G.E.M. Anscombe, ‘The first person’, in *Mind and Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, ed. by Samuel Guttenplan), 45–65.

Cartesian metaphysics also tells against the specifically *metaphysical* version of solipsism which insists that one particular self – MYSELF – is somehow at the centre of the universe.

In this paper, though, I have focussed on a *meaning-theoretic* version of solipsism, as characterised via the Solipsistic Thesis in §1.2. And this *meaning-theoretic* solipsism does not take any stance on whether ‘I’ refers in subjectival statements. Indeed, we saw in §1.3 that *meaning-theoretic* solipsism leads, via the Compositional Constraint, to *selfless* solipsism. And we obviously cannot criticise *this* version of solipsism, by insisting that subjectival uses of ‘I’ do not refer to any self.

Worse: insisting that subjectival uses of ‘I’ do not refer actually *exacerbates* the threat of selfless solipsism. We can see this by rehashing some ideas from §1.3. When I say ‘Ali hurts’, I simply state a fact about Ali, an object *in* the world. But if ‘I’ does not refer when I (subjectively) say ‘I hurt’, then I do not thereby attribute (*real*) pain to any object in the world. I draw no boundary between myself and the world, and so attribute HURT to the world itself. And that is selfless solipsism.

In short, many of Wittgenstein’s remarks in 1933–4 actually seem to *entail* selfless solipsism. And it is not immediately obvious that this would be contrary to Wittgenstein’s aims. After all, Wittgenstein had once claimed that ‘what solipsism *means* is quite correct; only it cannot be *said*, but shows itself.’<sup>50</sup> Perhaps he still believed, in 1933–4, that ‘the I of solipsism shrinks to an extensionless point, and there remains the reality coordinated with it’.<sup>51</sup>

In fact, the textual evidence is too thin to form a firm judgement on Wittgenstein’s views in 1933. But it worth noting that Wittgenstein’s 1933-lectures, preceding *The Blue Book*, contain nothing concrete about how to *avoid* this route to (selfless) solipsism. We have, for example:

Solipsism is right, if it merely says: “I have tooth-ache” is on quite a different level from “He has tooth-ache”. ¶ If he says that he has something which the other has not; he is absurd & is making the very mistake of putting the 2 on the same *level*.<sup>52</sup>

Wittgenstein clearly says that it ‘is absurd’ to embrace the *metaphysical* version of solipsism, which insists that MYSELF is the centre of the universe. But the rest of what he says is quite compatible with *selfless*, meaning-theoretic, solipsism.

If it were true that this ‘solipsism, strictly carried through, coincides with pure realism’<sup>53</sup> – as Wittgenstein had claimed in the *Tractatus* – then perhaps we could

---

<sup>50</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, §5.62.

<sup>51</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, §5.64.

<sup>52</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophy* (Moore), 8:29. See also *Philosophy* (Ambrose), §20.

<sup>53</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, §5.64.

live with it. However, if I arrive at selfless solipsism by the route outlined in §2, then my world will not coincide with the world of the realist, but will instead retain a detestably solipsistic residue. For, as things stand, I will have two languages: our *ordinary* language, and also a *phenomenological* language. Once I have recognised that a subjectival use of ‘I’ does not refer to anything, I will stop saying that the phenomenological language makes claims about *me* or about *my* experiences.<sup>54</sup> Still, to describe the world in its entirety, I will need to use *both* languages. And there will be no possible *comparison* between ordinary, as described in ordinary language and attributed to ordinary human beings, and (real) HURT, as described in (~~my~~ the?) phenomenological language, and attributed to (the limits of) the world. That, surely, is unacceptable.

### 3.4 Expressivism avoids solipsism

As mentioned: I am not sure about Wittgenstein’s explicit views on selfless solipsism in his 1933-lectures. Fortunately, though, his *Blue Book* contains some remarks which commit him to denying that there is any *truth* in selfless solipsism.

In §3.3, I suggested that selfless solipsism is not just *compatible* with the idea that subjectival uses of ‘I’ do not refer, but is *entailed* by that idea. However, my argument implicitly depended on the premise that subjectival utterances express bona fide *judgements*. The problem, in a nutshell, is that any judgement I make would draw no boundary between myself and the world. But, if I make *no* judgement in saying (subjectively) ‘I hurt’, then I neither ascribe anything to me nor to the world. (There is no HURT, and no unacceptably solipsistic residue.)

In principle, there are many ways to flesh out the idea that I make no judgement in saying ‘I hurt’. But a specific account, known as *expressivism*, holds this:

**Expressivist Thesis.** Uttering ‘I hurt’ is on a par with moaning in pain. Neither action amounts to asserting something truth-apt; the actions simply *evince* pain.

Expressivists have nothing to fear from selfless solipsism. Whilst my words ‘I hurt’ make no reference to me, nor do my moans, and nothing deep follows from either fact. So, by adopting expressivism, it is possible to maintain that subjectival uses of ‘I’ do not refer, whilst avoiding selfless solipsism. Perhaps, then, this is why Wittgenstein suggested that ‘[t]o say, “I have pain” is no more a statement

---

<sup>54</sup> Instead, I might say that this language distributes ‘the use of the word “I” over all human bodies as opposed to [L.W.] alone’. Wittgenstein, NLPESD, 281; also NLPESD, 298; *The Big Typescript*, 516.



about a particular person than moaning is’;<sup>55</sup> it would allow him to avoid sliding into an unacceptable solipsism.

This is a step in the right direction. However, it does not provide much by way of an *answer* an already-committed solipsist. As it stands, the selfless solipsist will just disagree with expressivism, and insist that his (subjectival) claim ‘I hurt’ really does express a full-fledged judgement. What we need is an argument that he is wrong. Hence, with Wittgenstein, we find ourselves saying:

The solipsist flutters and flutters in the fly-bottle, bashes against the walls, flutters on. How is he to be brought to rest?’<sup>56</sup>

In fact, the solipsist is to be brought to rest by developing a private language argument.

## 4 Private languages

Wittgenstein’s ‘Notes for lectures on “private experience” and “sense data”’ contain a fairly detailed prototype of his private language argument.<sup>57</sup> Over several pages, Wittgenstein raises issues which his *Philosophical Investigations* will later make famous. These issues include: what it could mean to ‘name’ a sensation type; what it could mean for sensations at different times to be of ‘the same type’; and what a necessarily private ‘justification’ could be. Robinson Crusoe even makes a cameo appearance.

Wittgenstein’s discussion of private languages ends by considering the complaint that he has neglected ‘the very essence of experience’.<sup>58</sup> Almost immediately after this, Wittgenstein briefly revisits his two uses of ‘I’.<sup>59</sup> Unfortunately, he does not make an explicit connection between these two points (perhaps because these are only lecture notes). My aim is to plug this gap, and to show how thoughts in the vicinity of Wittgenstein’s private language argument show that subjectival statements must lack (almost) any public content.

---

<sup>55</sup> Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book*, 67; see also *The Blue Book*, 68; NLPESD, 301–2, 309, 319.

<sup>56</sup> Wittgenstein, NLPESD, 300; then compare *Philosophical Investigations*, §309.

<sup>57</sup> Wittgenstein, NLPESD, roughly 287–97.

<sup>58</sup> Wittgenstein, NLPESD, 297; and compare *Philosophical Investigations*, §§304–6.

<sup>59</sup> “‘I see so-and-so’ does not mean “the person so-and-so, e.g., L.W., sees so-and-so”.’ Wittgenstein, NLPESD, 298.

## 4.1 A quick connection to private languages

It is tempting to draw the following, straightforward connection between subjectivity and Wittgenstein's private language argument:<sup>60</sup>

- (a) Subjective statements are attempts to describe phenomenology.
  - (b) If phenomenology can be successfully described at all, then it must be described in a necessarily private language.
  - (c) If Wittgenstein's private language argument is correct, then there cannot be a necessarily private language.
- So: if Wittgenstein's private language argument is correct, then there can be no successful subjective statements.

I established premise (a) in §2.3, and (c) is uncontroversial. Moreover, (b) is certainly *plausible*. However, nothing I have said so far *forces* it upon us. For example, it is not immediately obvious that a narrowly phenomenological description of my pains could not help a doctor to diagnose my illness. So, in what follows, I will allow that (b) might be false, but will show how Wittgenstein's early discussion of private languages provides us with materials for showing that subjective statements lack (almost) all public content.

## 4.2 Subjective statements and testimony

In §2.3, I explained that everything *physical* must be bracketed from subjective claims. In fact, we must also bracket anything relating to *testimony*. To see why, consider an example due to Coliva:<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Thanks to Rob Trueman for suggesting I consider this quick argument.

<sup>61</sup> Annalisa Coliva, 'Which "key to all mythologies" about the self? A note on where the illusions of transcendence came from and how to resist them', in Prosser and Recanati, eds., *Immunity to Error through Misidentification: New essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 22–45), 26. For a very similar example, see Frédérique Vignemont, 'Bodily immunity to error' (same volume, 224–46), 224. For a slightly different use of testimony, Daniel Morgan 'Immunity to error through misidentification: What does it tell us about the *de se*?' (same volume, 103–23), 107.

In fact, Wittgenstein explicitly considers subconscious thoughts whenever he considers subjectivity. For example, he asks why we might ever say something like 'x has a subconscious toothache', and concludes that the meaning of this phrase would have to be 'bound up with a human body: I couldn't have it, if my body were destroyed.' (*Philosophy* (Moore), 8:35; see also *The Blue Book*, 55, 57–8.) This contrasts with the insistence that I (subjectively) can have conscious toothache, even if I have no body at all (see §2.3). That is: Wittgenstein would indeed have classified any claim about the subconscious as objective.

**Testimony Example.** I am attending group therapy sessions. The therapist leading the group tells me that my behaviour reveals that, deep down, I hate myself. I trust her testimony, and so I claim ‘I hate myself’. But in fact the therapist is talking to someone else in the group, not me.

As such, the statement ‘I hate myself’ is objectival, at least as ordinarily understood. Contraposing, subjectival statements cannot involve any content which could be connected with the testimony of other people.

However, the impact of testimony extends beyond the purview of subconscious thought. In lecture notes dated shortly after *The Blue Book*, Wittgenstein makes this note: ‘Can a man doubt whether what he sees is red or green? (Elaborate this.)’<sup>62</sup> I will elaborate on this, on Wittgenstein’s behalf, by using a variant of the Testimony Example:

**Relearning Example.** Several of us have had an unfortunate accident and, as a result, we must all relearn our colour-words. I am staring at a colour-swatch, and my teacher says ‘you’re seeing red’. So I claim ‘I see red’. But in fact the teacher is talking to someone else in the group, who is staring at a different swatch.

As Wittgenstein required, this sort of Example generates a situation – admittedly, a rare one – in which a man – me – can legitimately doubt whether what he sees is red or green. But now I want to focus on what this Example teaches us about subjectival claims.

In the Relearning Example, we may take it that my colour-words pertain to the *physical* swatches. In that case, my claim ‘I see red’ is objectival; indeed, it is as objectival as ‘I have a red swatch in my hand’, and for the same reason. However, this is no surprise. In §2.3, we saw that my *subjectival* claims must be a description of my *phenomenology*, and not (for example) an attempt to describe some physical swatch. To make the Relearning Example interesting, then, we should assume that, in the Relearning Example, I am saying ‘I see red’ in an effort to describe my phenomenology.

Now, in §4.1, we considered the following:

- (b) If phenomenology can be successfully described at all, then it must be described in a necessarily private language.

If we assume this, then I must offer ‘I see red’ in a necessarily *private* language. In that case, nothing the teacher might say in a *public* language could either give me any grounds *for* saying ‘I see red’, nor count *against* my saying that. At that point, the Relearning Example will become wholly irrelevant to the question of whether my claim ‘I see red’ is subjectival or objectival.

---

<sup>62</sup> Wittgenstein, NLPESD, 282.

However, as explained in §4.1, I do not want to assume (b). Instead, I am assuming that we can (try to) describe phenomenology in a *public* language. And in that case, the Relearning Example remains relevant to my claim ‘I see red’.

Indeed, if we assume that we can (try to) describe phenomenology in a public language, then we must conceive of the Relearning Example as follows: by *directly* teaching us the names for the physical colours, the teacher is *indirectly* teaching us the names for the (our?) phenomenological colours.<sup>63</sup> And on this understanding, the Relearning Example has this structure: I take it that the teacher was indirectly saying something about *my* phenomenology, when in fact she is indirectly saying something about *someone else’s* phenomenology. If I were to find all this out, I would stop saying ‘I see red’, but would remain justified in saying ‘someone else sees red’.

In short: if my statement ‘I see red’ describes my phenomenology in a *public* language, then my statement is *objectival*. Conversely, if I want to insist that my statement is *subjectival*, then I must bracket the intended meaning of my statement, so that it is narrower *even* than an attempt to describe phenomenology.

64

### 4.3 ‘Hello, World!’

In fact, though, the amount of bracketing that is required would leave ‘I see red’ with (almost) no public content at all. To show this, I will consider various attempts to express the supposedly remaining content in a public language, and show why they fail.

I might start by suggesting the following:

‘The public content of a subjectival utterance of “I see red” is roughly that of “I see *this* colour”. For I grant that someone else saw *red*; but I cannot doubt that I saw *this* colour.’

However, ‘*this* colour’ is a demonstrative, and – in Wittgensteinian spirit – you should ask me *what* is demonstrated. I might respond by accompanying the word ‘*this* colour’ by a gesture, perhaps pointing at the colour-swatch I am looking at.

---

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Wittgenstein, NLPESD, 285, 301.

<sup>64</sup> Whilst I will focus on examples concerning Relearning, it is instructive to note that a similar point can be made by considering mis-speaking. **Example.** *I encounter a woman who is groaning in agony. I call an ambulance, and wait with her. When a paramedic arrives, I try to explain the situation. I say ‘I hurt, she is fine’. The paramedic looks at us both, confused, and says ‘Really? You seem ok.’ I realise my mistake: ‘Yes, I mixed up my words; she hurts, rather than me’.* With Hilary Putnam, I think it is a mistake to *dismiss* this kind of phenomenon as a (mere) ‘slip of the tongue’. As Putnam points out, ‘in the case in question I didn’t even notice I was misdescribing until someone questioned my report (and might never have noticed otherwise)’. See Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 70.

But this will bring me back to the colour of swatches, and away from my phenomenology. So I will be tempted, instead, to insist that my words ‘*this* colour’ are accompanied by some inner, mental version of pointing. I want, as it were, to point to a location in my own visual field, or perhaps a spot in my inner colour-space. But such an ‘inner pointing’ is, of course, utterly inarticulable, as Wittgenstein brought out as early as *The Blue Book*.<sup>65</sup> If my aim is to convey something public, this is not the way to go.

As such, I must give up on any attempt to say something *specific* about colour – whether by using a name or a demonstration – in a public language. So I must make my claim more generic. I might try suggesting:

‘The public content of a subjectival utterance of “I see red” is roughly that of “I see *some* colour”.’

The Relearning Example does not threaten this claim. However, we can bring it into jeopardy just by slightly tweaking the Example. Imagine that the group is being taught names, not just for colours, but also for *textures*. I am rubbing a swatch of hessian, and hear the teacher say ‘you’re seeing red’. I take her to be addressing me, and so say, ‘I see red’. But in fact, the teacher is speaking to someone else. My eyes are closed, and I am *seeing* nothing, but *feeling* hessian. And this example directly connects with one of Wittgenstein’s own remarks about private languages: if my aim is to provide my own labels for my phenomenology,

[...] then how can I call it a colour? Isn’t it just as uncertain that I mean by ‘colour’ what they mean as that I mean by ‘red’ what they mean? And the same applies of course for ‘seeing’.<sup>66</sup>

Summing up: I have been led to acknowledge that the public content I would express by saying (subjectively) ‘I see red’ must be *even thinner* than what I would express by saying ‘I see [something]’. And at this point, I must simply concede that there is *no* public content left to my claim that ‘I see red’, if it is supposed to be subjectival. Or rather: the only content which could possibly remain is the sort of content that is usually conveyed with a claim like ‘I am conscious’. And, since the content is to be public, we should not hear either claim as uttered in hushed, reverential tones – as flagging some deep riddle of consciousness – but as if they had been said by someone who has woken up from their anaesthetic and wishes to indicate that they are once again receptive to stimuli. It is a version of the ‘Hello, World!’ that one uses to show that a system is (barely) functioning.

---

<sup>65</sup> Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book*, 64–6; NLPESD, 307–11, 320; *Philosophical Investigations*, §398.

<sup>66</sup> Wittgenstein, NLPESD, 288. See also *Philosophical Investigations*, §398.

## 4.4 Solipsism avoided

I have established that subjectival claims must lack (almost) any public content. It only remains to show how this allows us to avoid solipsism.

The route to solipsism outlined in §2 ran as follows: in considering subjectivity, I realise that my aim is to describe pure phenomenology, and so I embrace the Dual-Meaning Thesis. However, once I have seen what I would have to bracket in the face of the Relearning Example, I am no longer compelled towards the Dual-Meaning Thesis. Certainly, the sense of ‘*x hurts*’ would have to be different, when on the one hand I say ‘he (kinda-)hurts’, and on the other hand I try to make a subjectival claim ‘I (really-)hurt’. But this is not because my ‘I (really-)hurt’ describes *real* pain, as it were; rather, it is because it fails to describe *anything*. It is the difference between saying something of an object, and saying ‘Hello, World!’

The crucial point in the refutation of solipsism, then, is as follows. *If ‘I hurt’ expresses more than an utterly minimal public content, then it must be objectival.* Now, this point is quite compatible with expressivism, as discussed in §3.4. But it is equally compatible with rejecting expressivism. Expressivism is just orthogonal to the real refutation of solipsism.

## 5 Conclusion

In this paper, I have reopened Wittgenstein’s ‘grammatical’ investigation of solipsism. The point I have arrived at is something like a grammatical correlate of a classic rebuttal to phenomenalism.

According to a certain kind of phenomenalist, we ‘start’ with sense data and *construct* ordinary objects from them. The classic rebuttal is that we do not ‘start’ with sense data. Rather, we ‘arrive’ at sense data, if at all, then by a process of *abstracting from* experiences of ordinary objects.

The thought I have elaborated here is that we do not ‘start’ with contentful subjectival judgements, either in the natural, temporal order of things, or in any important ‘order of justification’. Rather, we *arrive* at such judgements by a process of *bracketing* ordinary judgements (if at all). However, when we really consider what such bracketing amounts to, they become (almost) contentless.

In a nutshell, then, the route out of solipsism comes from Wittgenstein’s realisation that “‘private experience’ is a degenerate construction of our grammar”.<sup>67</sup> Having seen this – via an early version of the private language

---

<sup>67</sup> Wittgenstein, NLPESD, 314.

argument – he came to believe that ‘[t]here is not – as I earlier believed – a primary language, as opposed to our ordinary one’.<sup>68</sup> As such, rather than *venerating* would-be subjectival claims, they can be disregarded as ‘that inarticulate sound with which some authors would like to begin philosophy.’<sup>69</sup>

*University of Cambridge*  
*button@cantab.net*

**Acknowledgements.** I wrote this paper during a period of research leave which was funded by a Philip Leverhulme Prize (awarded by the Leverhulme Trust, PLP–2014–140). Many thanks to Bill Child, Jane Heal, Guy Longworth, Lucy O’Brien, Mark Sainsbury, Rob Trueman and Rachael Wiseman for comments on drafts of this paper.

---

<sup>68</sup> Wittgenstein, *The Big Typescript*, 488.

<sup>69</sup> Wittgenstein, *The Big Typescript*, 492.